

CHAPTER THREE

BEYOND THE WORKSHOP: INTERVIEWS AND PARTIAL CONCLUSIONS

Moving towards answers to our initial question

As I noted early in Chapter One, the main question we approached this project with was: how might religious educators encounter popular culture texts in a media literacy framework, and in what ways could such a framework prove useful to them? The process of working through the various genres of pop culture, detailed in the preceding Chapter Two, provides the first set of answers to that question, at least in terms of precisely *how* and *what* this particular group of religious educators chose to do. But simply exploring the media texts did not, as I had expected it might, provide clear answers to the question of building bridges into religious education. Clearly we all enjoyed the process of critiquing the media texts, and religious language and religious ideas were raised by each session according to the post-session interviews. Yet explicit religious language and ideas were not obviously apparent in most of the workshop sessions themselves, and it was only later, through the process of post-workshop interviews, that participants began to reflect out loud on that aspect of the process.

Learning that occurred outside of the workshop

There are two main ways in which I can document learning that occurred outside the venue of the workshop itself. By “learning” I mean the ways in which workshop participants felt that they struggled to integrate the materials and ideas from the workshop. The first is through the round of “check-ins” that we always did at the beginning of a session. Frequently people used that time as an opportunity to talk about ways in which they were using the materials and ideas we were exploring. The second way in which I tried to document this kind of learning was through lengthy individual participant interviews at the close of the six sessions of the workshop. There are, as well, a few examples that emerged in our post-workshop interpretation meeting.

Uncovering the learning that took place “outside” of the workshop sessions has been much more my own task, and less a collaborative one on the part of the group. To begin with, most of this data comes from the individual interviews I undertook with project participants. The information was generated in one-on-one conversations that took place outside of the larger group process, although of course since what we were talking about was the larger group process, we were never isolated from it.

I began with these post-session interviews with a very general outline, or “interview agenda.”¹⁰⁹ This outline ensured that I wouldn’t forget to ask each person the same kinds of questions, although since I wanted to foster a conversation more than I wanted to hold to a rigid script, I did not word the questions identically in each case. My outline began by clarifying demographic information (such as age, religious community, and so on),

¹⁰⁹ See Appendix C. for my general outline of questions.

and then asked for general overall impressions, good, bad, indifferent of the process. Next I asked about each session, generally naming them by the content involved (for example: the “television commercial session” “the newscast session” and so on). After that I asked about things that had been questions for me all along, such as in what ways this process had felt useful to them for religious education, in what ways it was “action,” whether there were times when they had felt silenced and so on. Finally I asked each person if there was anything else in particular that they wanted to share about the process.

In every case I tried to encourage an interview that was rather more informal than it was rigidly detailed. While “conversation” might be too strong a word to use, since it was primarily I who was asking the questions, and the group member who was responding, I never tried to prevent tangential discussions. This meant that in some cases we spent time talking about masters’ thesis projects (three of the people in the group were beginning to work on their projects, and were trying to incorporate elements of the workshop into their writing), or talking about power issues in seminary settings (one of the group and I had shared similar experiences at a local divinity school). The interview outline provided a guide that led us back into direct conversation about the project, and kept us fairly well focussed.¹¹⁰

Most of the interviews lasted for about an hour and a half, although one was only an hour long, and there were a few that we had to end after

¹¹⁰ As Maguire (1987, p. 153) notes about the more dialogical process she used in interviewing participants in a PAR project: “the dialogue process was also beneficial to the women themselves. In the interview process they cried, laughed, questioned, and evaluated...” I had similar experience in these post-workshop interviews.

two hours of talking (due to time pressures), even though we could quite easily have kept on longer.

I managed to interview all but one of the project participants over the course of the four months following the workshop sessions. That person was also the person who left the process roughly halfway through, not coming to either of the last two workshop sessions. Although I tried repeatedly to contact him, both over the phone and in writing, and although other project members who encountered him in their classes asked him to call me, he never did. He was the youngest member of our group, a graduate student in theology who repeatedly spoke of how overwhelmed he was with classwork, and the only one to “come out” as gay during the process. Although I can imagine many reasons for this silence, none of them seem clear enough to draw conclusions from. I note his absence from the later stages of this project to be clear about where my data comes from.

I have struggled with how to analyze what amounts to hundreds of pages of transcripts for relevant conclusions that will respect the larger process, and yet allow the insights generated from the individual conversations to emerge. How to interpret this information? There are many strategies for data analysis available within the social sciences. In particular I wanted a method that would help me to remain very close to the process of the workshop, and the concerns of its participants. In short, I wanted the process of data analysis to respect the participatory nature of the data collection. Qualitative analysis in general, as Jensen (1987, p. 31) notes, “attaches primary importance to those categories that can be derived internally from the respondent’s own conceptual framework,” and thus it was to qualitative analytic methods that I looked.

In the end, what I chose to do is a very rough kind of coding that permits what Potter (1996, p. 127) labels “low-level inference,” or the ability to make descriptive statements with some degree of validity within a specific case. In this project I read the transcripts through several times, each time jotting down notes to myself of issues that seemed to be common to several of the interviews. Obviously the development of such shared themes was helped by the fact that I was asking each person similar questions.

Then I went back, again, to the transcripts with a set of colored pencils. As I found a statement, concern or conclusion that I remembered as repeated several times throughout other transcripts, I would underline it in a particular color and then give a brief “label” to that theme in a separate notebook, along with the transcript reference. In this way I worked through all of the transcripts several times, eventually ending up with nine main “themes” that grew out of at least three of the interviews, although in many cases they were repeated in the majority, or even in all of the interviews. Within the realm of grounded theory, or other forms of data analysis often used within qualitative research, this kind of coding is really only considered “preliminary” analysis.¹¹¹ I chose not to do the more detailed kind of coding these methods utilize primarily because this research project is, itself, more of a preliminary step in defining the interaction of media literacy and religious education. I was interested in ensuring that I respected our process, and that the concerns of workshop

¹¹¹ See, for example, Lindlof’s (1995, p. 219) description of analytic coding, in which the kind of coding I used in this project is only the very first, preliminary, step towards an analysis. Lindlof quotes Charmaz (1983) as noting that this kind of coding “sorts out the more discernible things in the texts.... this kind of coding does not require very complicated rules of inference for identifying instances of particular categories.”

participants were respectfully elicited and faithfully described. I did not feel that the scope of this project required moving beyond that kind of characterization of results.

The nine themes I identified were as follows: “media literacy tools that worked well for our workshop,” “practical ways in which the format of the workshop was useful,” “practical ways in which people used techniques from the workshop in their own contexts,” “more abstract thoughts about how media literacy tools could be used in religious contexts,” “problems we encountered, whether in our own process or outside of the workshop,” “transformation of viewpoint,” “actions taken,” “the complexity of this kind of process,” and “how media literacy could enhance faith.”

I then went through and read the “theme threads” again, trying to discern if there were some kind of conclusion to be drawn from them. In some cases, for instance, theme threads overlapped and statements people made could fit under more than one “conclusion.” Initially I was also looking for statements that might contradict, or be at some variance with these themes, but as it turned out there was considerable consensus and very little disagreement about the process and substance of the workshop. Eventually I came up with the following summary statements, which I will detail briefly, and then explore at some length.

First, media literacy is a useful concept for religious education, and the *Catholic Connections to Media Literacy (CCML)* curriculum was a good place from which to begin, although useful more as a resource than a “set” curriculum. In particular, two elements of the CCML media literacy curriculum were felt to be useful. The exercises themselves (that is, exploring and critiquing individual media texts) are fun and informative,

which makes engaging in them a self-motivating endeavor. Organizing discussions in both small and large group settings also worked well, a conclusion embedded in the Vella (1994) principles as well as in the *Catholic Connections to Media Literacy* kit. One element specific to our circumstances that people felt was crucial, was the diversity of group. Everyone felt this kind of diversity should be repeated in other contexts using the kit, particularly since people responded so differently to the same media texts.¹¹²

Second, media literacy tools can be used well in a specifically religious context, particularly for the following reasons:

- media literacy helps to overcome the perceived dichotomy between so-called “secular” or “popular” culture, and “religious” culture making it possible to engage “everyday” experience as an element of faith formation;

¹¹² There is a growing literature addressing “teaching across difference.” See, for instance, the Bergin & Garvey series of books, *Critical Studies in Education and Culture*, edited by Henry Giroux and Paulo Freire, especially Kanpol & McLaren (1995) from that series. The *Harvard Education Review* recently published a set of articles that address these issues from the standpoint of “whiteness”; see, in particular, Fine, Weis, & Powell (1997), Maher & Tetreault (1997), and Giroux (1997). Rather than explore this literature in detail here, I would simply note that it supports the conclusion at which workshop participants themselves arrived. Burbules & Rice (1991, pp. 404-405) suggest three advantages to this kind of engagement with “difference”: “... first ... one’s identity will be more flexible, autonomous, and stable to the degree that one recognizes one’s self as a member of various different subcommunities simultaneously.... second, ... this endeavor ... can yield ... opportunities for deeper self-understanding and a release from the commonsense assumptions that typically frame our daily existence.... Third, the very activity of pursuing and maintaining dialogue across differences can foster in us more general dispositions and practices of communication that help support more successful communicative relations with a variety of people over time.”

- following our desires, our pleasures in the consumption of popular media can be a significant entry point into religious formation and education; and
- “critical thinking”¹¹³ is an important part of religious education, and media literacy work is a fun way to help people develop critical thinking skills (this includes the ease with which social justice issues can be introduced into a religious education classroom using popular media).

Third, the process can be perceived as transformative, and leading to action, especially in terms of individual attitudes and practices. People attributed this kind of change in particular to a dialogue that brought varying opinions and beliefs together in an environment where the difference could be engaged rather than avoided.

Media literacy is a useful concept for religious education

The descriptions of each session of the workshop in the previous chapter have detailed the kinds of strategies by which we practiced media literacy in this project. Questions such as “who’s in, who’s out?” and “who wins, who loses?” for example, formed a part of each of our discussions, no matter which genre of popular media we were considering. Considering specific media texts as from within a “genre” (whether commercial, newscast, film, music video and so on), is also

¹¹³ Brookfield (1987, pp. 7-9.) offers a lucid definition of critical thinking, noting in particular four components: “1. Identifying and challenging assumptions is central to critical thinking.... 2. Challenging the importance of context is crucial to critical thinking.... 3. Critical thinkers try to imagine and explore alternatives.... 4. Imagining and exploring alternatives leads to reflective skepticism....”

characteristic of the kind of media literacy perspective that the group felt was energizing.

While group members clearly felt that the CCML curriculum was a useful starting point, they did not perceive it as a wholly satisfactory resource for use in religious education. First, what they found useful were the following elements of the kit's process: considering specific genres through examining particular "texts" in depth, exploring the technical aspects of how a specific text was constructed, trying to discern how the five "media literacy principles" function within a specific text,¹¹⁴ and exploring their own emotional responses to it. Several participants, for example, commented on the utility of looking very closely at a specific "text" in terms of how it was put together:

George: ... we talked about... how certain things were filmed. We talked about our reactions to the way certain things were filmed. We talked about our impressions of certain symbols. We talked about various levels of the film. Did it work, did it not work. We talked about, I think, in a sense, parts of it we found more genuine or more believable and, and in a sense those parts that worked for us. ... that kind of discourse, that level of discourse is fundamental to media literacy...

Maggie: How it's structured, how it's put together.... it's not just an emotional reaction to it, or an experience you've had and then you put away, but it informs more of your thinking, or it changes how you felt about it, or it deepens how you felt about it.

George: ... it helps you become more reflective on what you saw. And allows you to talk about it, in a ... more critical way.¹¹⁵

Everyone I interviewed spoke at length about the ways in which the flexible, yet clear structure of the workshop was helpful to their learning.

¹¹⁴ See the discussion of media literacy principles that begins in Chapter Two of this work for a list of these principles.

¹¹⁵ Transcript #7, p. 3.

This structure was built into the workshop as part of using Vella's principles, but the CCML curriculum lent itself to that structure quite well, because it is built around a series of "stand alone" sessions.

Fern: Actually I think what worked throughout for me was the format... people are really valued for their experiences and who they are, and why they're there, and what they bring... that was the whole premise, that was what we were going to do together... people in dialogue, in conversation about an issue...¹¹⁶

This issue of format, in addition to the basic understanding that we were collaborating together in this project, had three distinct emphases. First, people were very excited to finally have an opportunity to come together with people who were interested in the same kinds of issues:

Sam: I guess what I enjoyed the most was just kind of being there and hearing other people talk about these things, and things that they saw....¹¹⁷

Fern: I was thoroughly absorbed... I was so into that movie [*Dead Man Walking*], and so aching for conversation about it. I kept telling people to go see it so I could have somebody to talk to about it. Eventually people did see it, and I got to share about it, but just coming here, it felt like the biggest luxury to just do it for two hours, and with people who are informed and passionate....¹¹⁸

Maggie:... one of the things that I noted in myself about coming, was that I always left energized. ... I suppose there's a way of looking at us as a group and saying that we had a lot in common. I was more struck by our diversity, than by our commonness, and I appreciated that.¹¹⁹

Jane: Well, my commitment to media literacy was there before I took this workshop. My job is basically developing it in a sense for the community that we work with. So in terms of media literacy per se, I picked up some things that were very helpful, and I really enjoyed the experience... how it impacted? I guess it's confirmation... I was so excited about it, about the interaction. Especially

¹¹⁶ Transcript #11, p. 1.

¹¹⁷ Transcript #15, p. 1.

¹¹⁸ Transcript #11, p. 6

¹¹⁹ Transcript #10, p. 3.

working with different denominations, working beyond the experience I have. I think it's a very essential part of developing where I fit in.¹²⁰

Second, many people found the breaking down into smaller groups, duets or quartets before coming to the larger group, for instance, very helpful:

Linda: I think that the media literacy group was really good for me in terms ... of finding my voice.... of speaking up and speaking out. I think I'm getting a lot better at that. But I think that I felt like it was a safe place to do that, and the small groups obviously help a lot to do that... I didn't feel pressured to see or to articulate, so I felt that it came a lot more easily.... there was so many interesting things going on, so many people had a lot of interesting things to say that I wish we could have been able to talk a little bit more. ¹²¹

Maggie: I found that when we had clusters of two or three people, there were some really good conversations.... And it was kind of nice to hear from ... the larger group, just even a few things, because it would be so different... that's where we heard from the Black or Hispanic women. And I wouldn't have heard that in my little lily white cluster, so it was really eye-opening, and they were brave, to be that willing to speak ¹²²

Third, people liked the basic definition of media literacy used by the CCML curriculum.

On the other hand, the curriculum was problematic because it defined its "reflection and action" sections in terms that left out the possibility that one could have a "religious" response to a piece of media that did not utilize traditional religious symbols, or occur in traditional religious terms. Each session of the curriculum couched its "reflection" piece, in particular, around a specific scripture. Although these suggestions could be helpful in some contexts, for this group of religious educators they seemed too much of a "proof texting" kind of match, and too little of an

¹²⁰ Transcript #13, p. 8-9.

¹²¹ Transcript #17, p. 10.

¹²² Transcript #14, p. 4.

organic flow. Given the sense that people felt that media literacy work could overcome a dichotomy between the “secular” and the “religious” (a conclusion we’ll turn to in a moment), this inability of the curriculum itself to move beyond that dichotomy was somewhat frustrating.

As noted previously, our group frequently did not feel a desire to transition into the section of the curriculum that utilized scripture, traditional hymnody, or other more “explicit” religious practices. While that lack of movement in such a direction could be attributed to my own inability as a facilitator to adequately prepare the space or lead the movement towards such a transition, it is also possible that the very act of engaging popular media, even those media without explicit religious symbols, contributed to people’s sense of the religious character of our encounters to such an extent that they felt no need to do the explicit “transitioning” in this context, but kept that for their own teaching contexts.

Media literacy tools work well in specifically religious contexts

The question of how to use media literacy tools and popular culture texts in the midst of religious education obviously was at the heart of our work together. Most of the articulation of answers to that question actually emerged in the interviews, because much of the workshop itself focussed on learning how to use the tools and working through the different genres of pop culture text. In general, there were three main points people thought were important about this process. First, media literacy work within religious education helps to overcome a dichotomy that many

religious educators feel, an artificial dichotomy between “religious” culture and “secular” or “popular” culture:

Fern: I think the dichotomy thing is really very real, it exists... I do enjoy it [pop media], but I haven't given myself permission to... Because I always think, oh this is just trash, or whatever... I've really come a long way in terms of wanting to ... find a balanced, integrated kind of approach to it, and that's been really helpful for me.... it's just so unrealistic to say it's all garbage.... I think religious communities definitely need to address what's being met here, and how can it be a pleasurable experience, or an entertaining enlightening kind of connecting experience, without becoming... all that someone has for their sense of community, or meaning....¹²³

Sam: I was listening to two songs about three days before my ordination. One of them was very much kind of me talking to God, and the other one God responding to me. So the next day I tell my director about that, and ... in the old society, the idea of listening to music while you're on retreat, would have been... heresy. When I was in the novitiate we weren't allowed to have radios in our rooms ... and that was only ten years ago. I mean that's why I feel there's a possibility of how media can touch a spiritual chord, God can use all. That's what Ignatius taught: God can use all things to reach us.¹²⁴

Cathy: ... initially going into this workshop, I thought that we were going to take the approach that everything out there is garbage, so somehow we've got to get different things on tv, different things in print, so on and so forth. ... now I see that ... it's really integrating, it's saying all right, there's stuff out there... We can't just ignore it, we can't just live in this separate world, where we're not facing reality ... but we've got to somehow integrate and work with what we've got.... I can take that kind of an approach which might especially work with adolescents.... You have to really be in touch and in tune with what's going on. And say, ok, yeah, I watched *Friends* last night, too, let's talk about those lesbian couples now what's going on, and really just talk about it. have them be aware and analyze and not just take it at face value.¹²⁵

Second, our pleasures in the consumption of popular media can be an important way into religious formation and education:

¹²³ Transcript #11, p. 11.

¹²⁴ Transcript #15, p. 4.

¹²⁵ Transcript #8, pages 6-7.

Sam: Ignatius was very interested in people's desires and their discernment and all that. I think, in our culture, the media has to play into that. ... his point is you get into the depth of that, the depth of discernment is looking at something critically. So we're attracted to television or movies, or whatever else, there's nothing wrong with that, that's part of our culture. The question is, again, being discerning as to what role it actually plays in our life, and does that lead us towards God or away from God? If it leads us away from God, there's probably something wrong. At least that's what Ignatius would say. And in that sense he would say look for that which leads us towards God.¹²⁶

This move towards a critical “read” of one’s emotional responses — which both takes them seriously, and yet problematizes them — may seem in some ways to be a contradiction. As Weiler (1991, pp. 463-464) notes: “both consciousness-raising groups and feminist theorists have asserted the social construction of feelings and their manipulation by dominant culture; at the same time they look to feelings as a source of truth.” Yet accepting this contradiction felt empowering to workshop participants, a characterization that I believe can be partly attributed to the kind of shift in frame that Kegan suggests is part of transformation (a point I will take up at length in Chapter Five).

Third, critical thinking is an important part of religious education, and media literacy work is a fun way to help people — particularly young people — develop critical thinking skills. This point came out particularly strongly with the experience one workshop member had of taking the Joan Osborne song that we had used in our second workshop into a religion class in a Catholic high school, and into a religious education class on a Sunday morning for teens who attend public high school:

¹²⁶ Transcript #15, p. 3.

Melanie: There's a lot of controversy surrounding that song that they [the students] were getting from parents and teachers.... In fact I used it for an eighth grade class in a Catholic school, and I also used it for an eighth grade religious ed class in a parish. And it was so different!

Holly: Oh, talk about the difference, that's interesting.

Melanie: ... well I can remember this kid at the Catholic school, with all of the questioning of that song.... The line I'm thinking of is 'would I have to buy into Jesus and the saints and all the prophets?' ... And he said, well you're kind of talking to the wrong audience here, we do believe all of that. So, it's a foregone conclusion. And that was sort of the way that whole thing went. I mean they are, they get some really good teaching there on an every day basis, and so they were a lot more literate. ... the term religious literacy is disparaged a lot, and sometimes deserves to be disparaged because it becomes just a fad, but I think there was some real truth with that group, it was such a contrast.... They could have a really intelligent discussion about the questions, and we were getting into how it was really talking about the incarnation and they knew that. ...

And the thing is, we talked a lot about the line about us being a slob, like one of us, in fact the teachers, I had a conversation with the teachers in the teachers' room at the Catholic school, about it, and most of them thought the song was really garbage, and were totally offended by it.

Holly: Isn't that interesting. The teachers were?

Melanie: Yeah there was maybe one teacher that would talk to me about it, the rest of them ... would never even talk about such a thing with these kids. And it was really that line, about God being a slob like one of us....

Part of that experience sort of cemented the fact that one way into kids is ... through their music...¹²⁷

As Miles (1996, p. 9) has pointed out, popular culture can often be a window into issues that religious communities are reluctant to address, or at least that they find difficult to address. One workshop participant used her experience with *Dead Man Walking* to make this point particularly strongly:

¹²⁷ Transcript #14, pp. 3-4.

Linda: What I think about religious programming is that it reflects basically the attitude that people want us to have about religion, in that it makes things right, in that it's good and peaceful and quiet and it's just sort of a sanitized version of religion. Which I don't see in the Bible.

Holly: That's not Jesus' story.

Linda: Right. There's a lot going on there that's simply not tapped into... because it's hard, it is hard to deal with some of the stuff that's in the Bible. And I think most people don't want to do it, because they won't know what to do with it. ... it's strewn with all kinds of violence, rape, war, and its calling people to live a certain way, to believe in certain things. And they're not easy things. So the hard edge is not captured. And I think a movie like *Dead Man Walking* somehow is able to catch the hard edge. I think maybe secular sources aren't as afraid of the hard edge as the religious community is. ... I think it's very difficult to be a Christian. I think what Christ is calling us to is incredibly hard. So I think that that's maybe one reason why religious programming doesn't really work, because I think religious programming comes to be, at least what I know of it, and I don't know very much of it, tends to be more interested in passing out a set of nice values....¹²⁸

The utility of using pop culture texts to “broach” difficult topics came up over and over again within the workshop process itself, with each session coming at some point to a discussion of a pressing social issue that the media text under consideration brought to our consciousness. Some of that frequency is no doubt due to the fact that I, in facilitating the workshop, chose to use texts that had some cultural “currency” (that is, they were on the air at the moment). As Miles notes, part of what makes a film popular is its ability to shed light on difficult topics of public discussion (1996, p. 7-9). But it is also true that workshop participants made their own choices about which issues to focus on within a specific text, and made their own choices about which texts to use within their own teaching contexts.

¹²⁸ Transcript #17, pp. 6-7.

This question of “difficult” topics arose with particular cogency around finding ways to introduce discussions of justice issues into the religious education context:

Jane: When you said, that first day, that media literacy is a justice issue. That really blessed me. I hadn't heard it anywhere else, and you said it right in the beginning of the workshop. And that stayed with me, and that's what I felt, but I hadn't expressed it in that simple way. I mean that was very powerful to me. That we really need to look at it not just as an educational, kind of fluffy, kind of nice thing, but it really has to do with God's justice, and that's why we should be doing it.¹²⁹

One member of the group experimented with the same commercial (*Diet Coke*) that we had used in one session in a variety of other contexts. Her experience of the ways in which context and location of participants shaped materials was striking:

Jane: In terms of things that I was able to use out of the workshop ... I really enjoyed the Diet Coke commercial, and the way you split it up in small groups, and beyond small groups.... I've used that a couple of times....Big groups, small groups, I've done it with the staff where I work, I've done it with a high school group at Lexington Christian Academy.

Holly: Did you find anything different about using it? or did you get any different reactions to it?

Jane: Yeah, actually it was funny, because the principal of the [high] school was sitting in my class I was amazed at how insightful the kids were, very media literate in a sense.... The principal said, I'm surprised that the kids that spoke the most were the most quiet in other classes. They would not say a word in other classes, but they were very talkative at the workshop. kids feel like they are experts in media, but there is no place for them to process it and even discuss it in classroom settings... but if you allow them to do that they learn to express themselves. If you would ask them to write papers, to do a video, to do interviews, they would all be able to pick up these skills because they are interested in the subject. So I think it really has a lot of potential to work with the youth.

¹²⁹ Transcript #13, p. 4.

I did it also with a Gordon-Conwell class. I was asked to do a seminar, and ... they were the most oblivious people. ... they didn't see these things immediately... I had to point out some things, like the role of women... and so forth, because they felt like it was totally justified, it was fine. So it really was, you know, it was very interesting. The Emmanuel Gospel Center, on the other hand, is very diverse, ethnically, and is in the city, in an urban setting. They have a lot of exposure to different people, and they know what racism or prejudice would look like. And so they were more sensitive to it, but the Gordon-Conwell crowd, which were mainly white, male Protestants, had a different kind of observation.¹³⁰

Yet while using media texts in this way was identified as being very helpful, there was also concern that we move beyond simply “using” these texts in a purely instrumental way in our educational practice. The primary dilemma identified was how to build on these kinds of “utilitarian” objectives — that is, those of overcoming a perceived dichotomy between religious culture and secular culture, using our pleasure in popular culture consumption as an entry point into religious formation, and using media literacy as a starting place for developing critical thinking — so that engaging popular media could become its own kind of religious practice, so that it could become something we do on a daily basis.¹³¹ While as a group we didn't come to any final conclusions, several members were very eloquent in their own musing on ways to do this. One suggested that we could engage media texts as a way into considering how authentic a representation of our humanity they are, and hence how representative of how we speak of God:

George: Let me tell you what I would hope it might be... If Christ was fully human, then we share that with him, that humanity. Anything that revealed a part of our humanity would reveal a part of Christ's humanity, or vice versa.

¹³⁰ Transcript #13, pp. 2-3.

¹³¹ Transcript #12, p. 3.

Anything that revealed his humanity reflected on ours. ... What I would do with media literacy, and again, I'm thinking primarily of television, is ask... how do those things we see reflect our humanity in a genuine way, and you can be critical in that way.... maybe that piece of dialogue is or isn't true, or that's a real two-dimensional character, that's a caricature... does what we saw on television reflect a symbol that we know, does it work, or not? ... And then what does that say about humanity ... then use this as a mirror to reflect on... The primary one is how does it reflect our humanity.¹³²

Another member of the group, who was reflecting on the difficulty we had had with integrating explicit prayer space into our work together suggested that it was important to remain in touch with the different kinds of “pacing” and “bodily involvement” embedded in prayer, versus a mediated text:

Francis: To talk more about the whole question of creating prayer space around media, I think you're always going to have a conflict. Because prayer space is at some level always going to be slower. I mean the point is to slow down, the point is to get off the treadmill, to slow down a little bit, get reflective, get centered, find God. ... the point of mass media is to keep you on the treadmill, is to pull you away from your center. ... I think that you would need... to do something ... looking at prayer space versus media space, you would have to do a whole day retreat on those two almost, whereby we consciously looked at the change of moods, and how it pulled us away from the center and what does it take to get back. And if you intentionally did something about pace, mood, centering, and that sort of thing, I could see you know with some, not just kind of the prayer space that goes with reflecting on a song, or a written or a verbalized prayer, but the kind of bodily, meditative sense, some sort of a yoga or vipassana meditation guide, helping the group get in touch with their bodies and the quiet space of that, and try to identify what was going on in your body when the media part was happening, and come back to that during the day.¹³³

¹³² Transcript #7, pp. 15-16.

¹³³ Transcript #9, p. 3.

What, if anything, was transformative about the process?

As I noted earlier, my own expectations coming into the workshop were that we might find ways to collaborate together beyond the space of the project itself, in what might be called “action,” whether political, cultural, and so on. Yet the part of each workshop session that the CCML curriculum specifically dedicated to “action” was always being left out, as it was always at the end of the meeting and we were forever running out of time. In some ways this inability to “finish” our agendas is my own responsibility as facilitator. Rather than force people to leave a topic or discussion with which they were clearly passionately engaged, I often chose to allow the dialogue to continue past the time allotted to it.

On the other hand, following the interest and passion of workshop members was a very high priority for me, and I was conscious of not wanting to force my own agenda on people. While I came into the workshop with a clear sense that media literacy work was a justice commitment, and made that clear to people, I didn’t feel that it would be appropriate to push them into a practice that was not emerging from the group process itself. Just as the “reflection” part of the CCML curriculum did not often engage people’s interest, so, too, did the “action” section seem like an awkward “adjunct” piece. Yet when I asked workshop members during our interviews if they felt that they, personally, or we as a group, had engaged in any kind of action, they unanimously said, “yes.” Most often they pointed to a transformation in their own attitudes and practices based upon interactions that happened within the group time as evidence of this action.

One session that many people returned to when I posed this question, was the one that examined the network news:

Linda: I thought that the one that we did that made a real impact on me, was the two newscasts I think about that all the time. Because you never think of the news as being a place where we're influenced, but we are. ... how is it being given to us, what is being given to us?... One of the things I was really struck by was language, I think, even more than the visuals. I think the language, and the words that were used to convey the same news bit... and what it did to the story.¹³⁴

Maggie: Another session that I've thought about a lot since is the one that we did on news. And I continue to think about that as I watch world news, or as I listen to national public radio... I didn't have a stance from which to be critical of the content of ... news. But that was a session that really meant something to me, that really stayed with me.¹³⁵

Over and over again, when asked *what* created the change, participants pointed to the process of engaging in dialogue with people who had different opinions about pieces we were viewing:

Fern: It was good to get the diverse views of it. There were things... that some people noticed that I hadn't. And it was good to hear those points of view. It woke me up to... viewpoints that I hadn't thought of.¹³⁶

Melanie: I guess what I liked best was the group, it was so diverse. I mean it really made me sit up and wake up on some things. Some of the Hispanic and Black women would come off with a totally disgusted evaluation of some of those commercials, for example, and I hadn't even thought about that aspect of it. So that was a really rich part of the process.¹³⁷

Fern: I remember how I talked about... watching the news in the morning, and how I like the personalities, I ... mean they don't tell me anything, they're just totally entertaining and David went off on WBZ, and I was like Oh man, [laughter] I thought it was very appropriate, he came up with critiques I've never

¹³⁴ Transcript #17, p. 3.

¹³⁵ Transcript #10, p. 2.

¹³⁶ Transcript #9, p. 1.

¹³⁷ Transcript #14, p. 2.

thought of, like the self-promoting, which is so true, and it was so normal to me that I didn't even notice it... he's right.¹³⁸

To summarize, then, media literacy is a useful concept for religious education, and the *Catholic Connections to Media Literacy (CCML)* curriculum was a good place from which to begin, although useful more as a resource than a “set” curriculum. In particular, two elements of the CCML media literacy curriculum were felt to be useful. The exercises themselves (that is, considering individual media texts) were fun and informative, which made engaging in them a self-motivating endeavor. Organizing discussions in both small and large group settings also worked well, a conclusion embedded in the Vella principles as well as in the CCML kit.

Second, media literacy tools can be used well in a specifically religious context, particularly for the following reasons: media literacy helps to overcome the perceived dichotomy between so-called “secular” or “popular” culture, and “religious” culture making it possible to engage “everyday” experience as an element of faith formation; following our desires, our pleasures in the consumption of popular media can be a significant entry point into religious formation and education; “critical thinking” is an important part of religious education, and media literacy work is an enjoyable way to help people develop critical thinking skills (this includes the ease with which social justice issues can be introduced into a religious education classroom using popular media).

Third, the process can be perceived as transformative in terms of individual attitudes and practices. People attributed this kind of change in particular to a dialogue that brought varying opinions and beliefs together

¹³⁸ Transcript #11, p. 6.

in an environment where the difference could be engaged rather than avoided.

These conclusions are, in themselves, very practical answers to the question with which we began the workshop, that is: how might religious educators encounter popular culture texts in a media literacy framework, and in what ways could such a framework prove useful to them? But even as I coded the interviews and discussed the results with the group, I realized that they only get at part of the challenge. In Chapter One, amidst a discussion of my reasons for choosing to use a participatory action research methodology, I briefly explored some of the distinctions between “method,” “methodology,” and “epistemology.” In that framework, the answers to our research question could be termed “methods,” perhaps even bordering on a “methodology” for integrating popular culture texts into religious education. But they are not yet an “epistemology.” That is, as enunciated above, they are clear practical suggestions of ways to use popular media in that context, but such suggestions do not, of themselves, provide a powerful explanation for why it is essential that religious educators do this work. They are “instrumental” reasons, or reasons that are “tools,” rather than underlying rationales, or “meta” reasons. It is in pursuit of this underlying rationale that I began to ask myself how critical engagement with popular culture might genuinely enhance religious experience. And it is to that question that I turn in the next chapter.